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William O. Beeman, Professor of Anthropology and Director of Middle East Studies at Brown University will this year assume the post of President of the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association. These affiliations are a good indication of the authority with which this book is written, as well as its anthropological grounding. Specifically a linguistic anthropologist, Beeman writes professedly with the angel of Margaret Mead on his shoulder; in addressing the process of “mutual demonization” between Iran and the US since 1972 (when the US assumed the primary Western presence in the Middle East), Beeman focuses on the “symbolic communication as it occurs between officials who lay claim to representing the policies of their nations” (xi). Beeman’s object is to critique the historical development of what clearly remains a dysfunctional cultural and rhetorical dynamic.

With great linguistic precision, as well as an historical and political incisiveness uncompromised by his dedication to clear, direct writing, Beeman begins his study with an examination of the “master myths” embedded in the official discourse of the US and Iran, respectively. In the case of the US, the “foreign policy myth” is grounded upon a number of questionable assumptions indicating a failure to come to terms with what Paul Gilroy calls “the postmodern eclipse of the nation-state”—including the assumptions that the primary global organising principle must be a “dichotomous power struggle”, that the bases of international relations must be “economics and power”, and that nations must be “ruled by small groups of elite individuals” (15-16). Iran’s mythic assumptions are grounded in the symbolic patterns of Shi’a Islam, including the myths of purifying martyrdom, through which the nation’s internal purity can be sustained against the “external pull of the corrupting world” represented by the US and such of its clients as the Pahlavi family (26). Beeman proceeds to deconstruct the rhetorical structures through which the images of otherness entrench and build upon such mythic assumptions, primarily as they have appeared since the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. The analysis is taken right through to the presidential elections of 2005, which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into the firing line of US “slander” (215). Beeman’s book obviously went to press before Ahmadinejad’s denial of the Holocaust, his call to wipe Israel off the map, and the current nuclear stand-off; but it is easy to perceive a continuation of the mutually dysfunctional discourse that Beeman comprehensively analyses.

Beeman is clearly saddened by the hijacking of discourse by officials in both countries, not least because it conditions both populations (and the on looking world)
to a “paranoid-schizoid” vision of humanity. Beeman does not use this phrase—it comes from Melanie Klein. But with all Klein’s insight into the ways in which we tend to split the world into idealised and demonised parts, and the ensuing paranoia that grows from such splitting, it is clear that Klein is, implicitly, the other angel on Beeman’s shoulder, and that his study is as much psychological as anthropological.